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AUTHOR Hilton, Jeanne M.; Macari, Daniel P.
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ABSTRACT

There is little information available on the roles played by grandparents in the lives of their grandchildren following the divorce or separation of the grandchildren's parents. This study compared the specific activities shared by grandparents and grandchildren in single-mother and single-father families of children in grades 1 through 4. Data on grandparent involvement following divorce or separation were obtained from questionnaires completed by the custodial parents in 30 single-mother and 30 single-father families who were recruited from randomly selected public schools in 2 metropolitan school districts. The impact of the gender of grandparent, kin position, and gender of custodial parent on the amount of contact, type of activities, and overall involvement level were examined. Findings indicated that grandparents were more involved in their grandchildren's lives when they lived close by, had custodial status, were grandmothers, or had a grandchild living with a single father. (Contains 15 references.) (KB)

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A Comparison of the Role of Grandparents in Single-Mother and Single-Father Families

Jeanne M. Hilton

and

Daniel P. Macari

Department of Human Development and Family Studies

University of Nevada, Reno

(702) 784-6490

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Abstract

Researchers rarely have examined the specific activities shared by grandparents and grandchildren, nor have comparisons been made of the involvement of grandparents in single-mother and single-father families. In this study, data on the involvement of grandparents was gathered from custodial parents in 30 single-mother and 30 single-father families. A self-report questionnaire was used to evaluate how gender of grandparent, kin position, and gender of custodial parent influenced the amount of contact, types of activities, and overall level of involvement. Grandparents were found to be more involved when they lived close-by, had an adult child with custodial status, were grandmothers, or had a grandchild living with a single father. These results challenge many gender-based assumption that have driven previous research and shaped grandparents legal rights.

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A Comparison of the Role of Grandparents in Single-Mother and Single-Father Families

Grandparents are thought to play an important role in the lives of their grandchildren. The bond between grandparents and grandchildren begins with the birth of a child and continues throughout life, giving children a sense of continuity, identity, and family history (Creasey, 1993). Grandparents may have an even greater influence on children when parents are divorced, acting as a stabilizing force and a stress buffer by providing children with a trustworthy and stable relationship (Clingempeel, Colyar, Brand, & Hetherington, 1992; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993; Kivett, 1991).

Despite these observations, researchers rarely have discussed the extent to which grandparents actually enact these roles, nor have comparisons been made of the involvement of grandparents in single-mother and single-father families. Therefore, three dimensions central to an examination of involvement of grandparents in the lives of grandchildren following divorce were assessed in this study: 1) amount of contact, 2) types of activities, and 3) frequency of involvement in these activities.

Most studies of the role of grandparents in divorced families have compared grandmothers with grandfathers in terms of the frequency of interaction and quality of the grandparent/grandchild relationship (Gladstone, 1991; Eisenberg, 1988; Thomas, 1986). It is also common to find studies on the role of grandparents from the perspective of maternal/paternal kin position (Johnson, 1988; Creasey, 1993). A few studies have considered the grandparent role within the context of custody status ("custodial" grandparents versus "noncustodial" grandparents) (Kruk & Hall, 1995; Myers & Perrin, 1993), and very few have looked at grandparenting in single mother versus single father families (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982). Nothing has been written, however, comparing grandparents across all three dimensions: 1) grandmothers versus grandfathers, 2) custodial versus noncustodial grandparents, and 3) grandparents in single-mother versus single-father families. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how gender of grandparents, kin position, and gender of

custodial parents affect the amount of contact, types of activities, and level of involvement shared by grandparents and grandchildren in divorced families.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected from the parent in 30 single-mother and 30 single-father families (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). The families were recruited through randomly selected public schools in two metropolitan school districts. From the target schools, teachers in grades one through four identified potential respondents from single-mother and single-father families.

Potential respondents were screened by telephone and a two-hour interview was scheduled with those who qualified and were willing to participate. Criteria for participation in the study were: (1) the single parent lived with a child (age 6-10) in a household with no other adults, (2) the child resided with the single parent an average of at least 20 nights per month, and (3) the single parent was divorced or separated with no history of remarriage. Contacts included 62 single mothers (30 participated; 23 disqualified; 9 refused) and 49 single fathers (30 participated; 18 disqualified; 1 refused).

Data on grandparents were collected from the parents who participated in the study. In the case of single mother families, the maternal grandparents were designated as custodial grandparents and the paternal grandparents were designated noncustodial. In single-father families, the paternal grandparents were considered custodial and the maternal grandparents were considered noncustodial.

Parents were asked a series of questions about the children's maternal and paternal grandparents, including which grandparents were alive and deceased. Out of the 240 grandparents of the children in the study, 48 were deceased, which resulted in 192 persons whose grandparenting was evaluated. Amount of contact, reasons for lack of interaction, and geographic proximity were assessed for each living grandparent. Amount of contact was assessed using one question: "How often does the child visit each of his/her grandparents?" Types of activities and

overall level of interaction were evaluated using 11 questions adapted from a study by Kennedy (1992).

For purposes of the analyses, grandparents were grouped into eight categories. Four groups consisted of custodial grandparents: single-father custodial grandmothers (n=28); single-father custodial grandfathers (n=25), single-mother custodial grandmothers (n=24); single-mother custodial grandfathers (n=23). The remaining four groups consisted of noncustodial grandparents: single-father noncustodial grandmothers (n=23), single-father noncustodial grandfathers (23), single-mother noncustodial grandmothers (22), and single mother noncustodial grandfathers (n=24).

A series of 2x2x2 analyses of covariance compared custodial/noncustodial grandparents, grandmothers/grandfathers, and grandparents in single-mother/single-father families. In the first analysis, amount of contact was the dependent variable. In the second set of analyses, comparisons were made using grandparent involvement with the focal child in 11 separate activities as dependent variables. The last analysis was run using a total involvement score (summed score over the 11 activities) as the dependent variable. For all analyses, geographic proximity was used as the covariate and a probability level of .05 was used to indicate significance.

Results

Amount of Contact

The covariate, geographic proximity, had a significant effect on the amount of contact between grandparents and their grandchildren. After the effects of the covariate were removed, significant main effects were found between custodial and noncustodial grandparents and between grandmothers and grandfathers (Table 2). Custodial grandparents had more contact than noncustodial grandparents, and grandmothers had more contact than grandfathers. There were no differences in amount of contact for grandparents in single-mother and single-father families, and there were no interaction effects among the variables.

Types of Activities and Level of Involvement

A significant effect was found for the covariate, geographic proximity, for all but two of the activities. After the effects of the covariate were removed, significant main effects were found for comparisons between custodial and noncustodial grandparents, grandmothers and grandfathers, and grandparents in single-mother and single-fathers families for both the activities, and the overall involvement score (Table 3). The pattern of findings was consistent, and there were no interaction effects in any of the analyses.

Overall, grandparents maintained greater contact when they lived close to their grandchildren, had custodial status, and were grandmothers. Grandparents were more involved with their grandchildren when they lived close-by, had custodial status, were grandmothers, and their grandchildren lived in a single-father family.

Discussion

The findings of this study challenge many of the assumptions that have driven previous research on the grandparent role. For example, one assumption has been that traditional differences in gender roles would be expected to carry over to grandparenting from the parenting role and that men and women will function as grandparents much as they did as parents earlier in adulthood (Baranowski, 1985; Kivett, 1991). Based on this assumption, women are assumed to function as kin-keepers, forging stronger bonds among their own bloodline, which allows maternal grandparents to have closer ties to grandchildren than paternal grandparents (Eisenberg, 1988; Hagestad, 1985).

An alternative view might be that the demands on grandparents are different than those of parents and the context within which grandparents function is very diverse. This is especially true when parents divorce; grandparents roles are affected dramatically. They may be called upon to provide support to the family at levels that would have been considered interference prior to the divorce.

This study supports earlier findings of decreased relations between *paternal* grandparents and grandchildren following divorce...but only when mothers have custody. When fathers have custody *maternal* grandparents are less involved. There is no support for previous claims that paternal grandparents are less involved because women maintain a unique role as intergenerational kin-keepers. Paternal grandparents are not disengaged or disinterested...they are disadvantaged by a legal system that disproportionately awards custody to mothers.

The assumptions that have driven research have also shaped grandparents legal rights following divorce and promoted inequities in the law. The need for this issue to be addressed is evident in the growing number of grandparents rights groups have successfully pushed for the right to continue a relationship with grandchildren following divorce.

Currently all 50 states have some form of grandparent rights legislation. The main consideration in determining how these rights will be implemented is reported to be the best interests of the child. In reality, parental rights prevail. Activists are currently stressing the need for grandparents rights to be independent of those of parents. This study supports the position of activists by documenting that noncustodial grandparents are disadvantaged by the current system, which compromises the rights of both grandparents and grandchildren.

In forging new policy, an understanding of the activities associated with each type of grandparent-grandchild relationship is critical for an accurate assessment of the frequency and quality of the particular intergenerational bond. It is hardly fair to judge a grandfather-grandchild relationship by focusing on activities typical of a grandmother-grandchild relationship, or to evaluate the role of paternal grandparents without considering custody status.

Family lawyers, activists, and family mediators can use this information in their attempts to redefine family relationships following divorce. Stressing the legal position of grandparents while pointing out the benefits that contact with the noncustodial grandparents might have on grandchildren, may help the parents see the salience of providing grandparent's visitation rights following divorce.

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Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	Single-Mother Families (n=30)	Single-Father Families (n=30)
Individual Variables:		
Age of Parent (mean)	35.6	37.5
Years of Education (mean)	13.3	15.1
Ethnicity		
Anglo-American	93%	86%
African-American	7%	10%
Hispanic	0%	4%
Family Variables:		
Years Married	7.5	6.9
Years Since Divorce/Separation	4.3	3.4
Annual Family Income (median	$15-20,000	$35-40,000
Household Size	2.9	2.8
Number of Children	1.9	1.8
Age of Children		
Oldest Child	9.3	9.6
Youngest Child	7.5	7.3

Table 2

Means Scores for Amount of Contact , Activities, and Overall Involvement of Grandparents

Variable	Custodial	Noncustodial	Grandmothers	Grandfathers	Single-Father	Single-Mother
CONTACT	3.02	1.87	2.64	2.24	2.44	2.49
ACTIVITIES						
Child stays overnight	2.40	1.58	2.13	1.85	2.15	1.85
Letters/phone calls	3.07	2.22	2.75	2.54	2.67	2.63
Child helps with chores	2.30	1.38	2.00	1.68	1.98	1.72
Celebrations	3.17	2.03	2.77	2.42	2.62	2.61
Child care	2.28	1.43	2.06	1.63	1.90	1.83
Shared vacations	1.84	1.31	1.65	1.51	1.65	1.52
Help child with problems	2.36	1.36	2.05	1.65	2.06	1.68
Teach child a skill	2.48	1.58	2.21	1.84	2.11	1.97
Shared outings	2.57	1.53	2.26	1.83	2.12	2.00
Special treats for child	2.93	2.06	2.72	2.25	2.51	2.51
Family stories	2.90	1.92	2.58	2.23	2.60	2.24
OVERALL	28.29	18.42	25.18	21.41	24.36	22.55

Table 3

Effects of Geographic Proximity, Custody Status of Grandparent, Sex of Grandparent, and Sex of Custodial Parent on Amount of Contact and Activities Shared by Grandparents and Grandchildren

Variable:	Geographic Proximity F(1, 8)	Custodial/ Noncustodial F(1, 8)	Grandmothers/ Grandfathers F(1, 8)	Single-Mother/ Single-Father F(1, 8)
AMOUNT OF CONTACT	54.532****	43.953****	4.720*	.335
ACTIVITIES				
Child stays overnight	18.339****	24.807****	2.241	7.817**
Letters/phone calls	3.301	24.503****	1.110	.251
Child helps with chores	9.685**	33.657****	3.359	4.938*
Celebrations	29.298****	44.481****	3.643	.937
Child care	10.387**	28.279****	7.330**	.866
Shared vacations	2.419	13.408****	.548	1.509
Help child with problems	8.169**	41.033****	5.333*	9.164**
Teach child a skill	11.806***	31.813****	4.850*	2.339
Shared outings	9.358**	40.096****	6.371*	1.513
Special treats for child	13.796****	23.467****	6.986 **	.294
Family stories	10.765***	32.030****	3.362	7.617**
OVERALL	18.595****	52.640****	6.557 *	4.464*

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$
*** $p<.001$
**** $p<.000$

Note: There were no significant interaction effects in any of the analyses

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